

Between Rounds

William T. Edwards

It was raining outside. Palmer could look out through the large plate-glass window at the front of the bar and see the rain slanting down before headlights that knifed through the dark. He concentrated on his drink.

Good night to be in a nice cozy bar, he was thinking. Bar is much better when it is miserable outside. Conversation comes easier and is more confidential. Feel warm inside your clothes.

He looked up into the big mirror behind the bar and along it towards the front to see if Kilby was coming in yet. He did not see his friend; so he looked back along the mirror for reflections of other people he might know. Seeing no acquaintance, he turned to his drink, finished it, and pushed the empty glass to the inside of the bar. The bartender caught the motion and looked at him. He bobbed his head slightly in the affirmative. While he was waiting for the drink, he looked back to the street.

A woman, holding her hat with one hand and leaning slightly into the rain, hurried by the window. Miserable weather. Palmer felt the hint of a chill on the flesh of his back. He raised his shoulders somewhat, then lowered them. The movement of cloth on his back sent a genuine shiver racing up to his scalp. Rotten outside. Cold rain pouring down through light in the street. Rain, lights, and darkness. He was thinking of a picture of a little girl on a salt-box and a caption that read, "When it rains, it pours." He was thinking that rain and darkness could both occupy the same point in space. That was one they had missed in Physics. Hell, that was a rich one. In Physics, they didn't say a word about rain in the night. They left that to poets. Kilby would like that one. Kilby would think that was funny as all get-out. Palmer had his hand up before his face trying to shield his smile. He wanted to laugh out loud. He wanted to laugh scornfully at Physics books that didn't say anything about rain-in-the-dark.

The bartender set the drink before him, picked out the right amount from the change on the bar, and thanked him. Palmer was about to say something, but Kilby had come up behind him and was speaking.

"You know, fellow, they say things about people who drink by themselves. Mind if I join you to help you save face?"

Palmer turned half around on the stool to face Kilby. He was smiling widely.

"When I drink with you, Kilby, I lose face. And speaking of faces, I was just sitting here thinking of Rain-in-the-Face. Do you happen to know if he ever taught Physics?"

Kilby sat down on the stool next to his friend. It was nice to see Palmer. It was nice to spend an evening talking to someone like Palmer. He had a good sense of humor. There was no need for a lot of preliminary small talk with him. Kilby thought that there was probably something behind the question. It would be interesting to see where the conversation might lead.

"It's hard to say how much Physics he knew, but witness his keenness in other fields. Now he was familiar with a very effective cure for dandruff, for instance. And, mind you, it was strictly surgery—done with the knife."

Palmer laughed at Kilby's image in the mirror. He did not laugh at the reply so much. The gag was an old one. He laughed because he was glad to see Kilby. He turned a little towards the front window.

"Now you are being facetious with me. Tell you what, Kilby, you look out into the street and tell me what you see. Tell me what you might add to what you see."

Kilby had laid his Chesterfields, lighter, and a one dollar bill on the bar. The bartender stopped opposite him. Kilby said, "Two of his," nodding at the almost empty glass of his friend. He looked out into the street from which he had just come.

The lights from the movie across the street sparkled through myriad falling raindrops, making it possible for the eye to catch the slanting, downward motion of glistening rain. Kilby saw a taxi pull in to the curb before the theater. After a moment or two, a man hurried from the cab to the ticket window, made his purchase, and disappeared through the door at the far end of the deep lobby. He heard a horn sound from down the street, and farther away, somewhere to the south in the city, he heard the nearly inaudible wailing of sirens. These sounds, he knew, were muted by many pounds of falling water between their source and his ear. He thought perhaps it was raining all over America. There would be rain beating on the roofs of shacks in the Mississippi cotton fields. There would be rain saturating the finger of light sent forth by a charging streamliner on the great plains. On the shores of Puget Sound, there would be thunder echoing through the forests and mud at the loggers camp. In Alabama, red clay would wash down into the ugly, gaping wounds of betrayed earth. And in the great cities? In cities, rain would splatter on the barren cement of streets. It would mute sounds of things—things like sirens. It would even bring people to bars.

The bartender picked up the dollar bill and dropped twenty cents in its place. Kilby heard people talking and music coming from the organ. He no longer saw the street. Palmer was waiting for him to speak. Both men faced forward and reached for filled glasses.

"I saw rain out there, Palmer. Rain and a man. I saw it raining on a Miocene swamp. I saw the Neanderthal walk into a cave to get out of the rain. It has been raining since time began."

Palmer was arranging and rearranging a stack of coins with his left hand. He seemed to be preoccupied with stacking them in some geometric pattern. Then he addressed Kilby without looking up.

"Miocene? Neanderthal? Talismanic names which scholars give to the mist that obliterates the "t" in time. Since time began? Words. Feeble arrows pointing to an infinitesimal parenthesis in eternity. Those terms have for their essence the phantasmal, elusive, swirling stuff of fevered dreams. But rain? But man? Begin there. Where can we go from there? Why is there rain, and why is man?"

Kilby was not yet at the stage of intoxication where answers to such questions are just beyond comprehension. He drank deeply from his glass and reached for a cigarette. He had to pull the smoke deeper than usual into his lungs to feel the satisfaction afforded by tobacco. He watched smoke twist up from the end of the cigarette. Fifty-two hundred degrees in a burning coal, separated from the mouth by dry weed and thin paper. Why is man? Why doesn't A follow Z? Why isn't the alphabet circular? Einstein says space is. Parmenides says "What is" is. Why, hellshells, maybe I is, maybe you is, maybe we is, maybe they is. And there you have a regular conjugation of "to be," or better still "to is." Why is man?

He parried the question.

"First tell me this, Palmer. Why do you ask? Why has man always asked that same question? Many believe that we exist for a purpose, and that belief presupposes a creator who knows all, who created us for the fulfillment of that purpose. Can you accept that?"

"Most of the time. But then I ask questions about my acceptance. Do I accept it as an essential truth, or do I turn to it from oblivion, from the breathless darkness that begins where time stops?"

Kilby pondered his cigarette. He knocked the ash off in a small tray and watched the tiny cone of fire shrink inward to shield itself beneath more gray ash. He saw the thin wisp of smoke lift up to be amplified into billowing clouds above a flaming, stricken forest. No. No, there was thunder and rain in the forest. Mud ankle-deep at the logger's camp. There was rain on wheat fields in the Dakotas. Rain falling on the black, rich soil of the corn belt. In the cities there was rain washing the corrupted air, rain washing dirt from the streets.

"Then think about the rain, Palmer."

Outside it had stopped raining, and lights glistened brightly in the night. Light sparkled for an instant from a thousand rain-jewels on a passing car.

Palmer turned to look out at the street. He drew in his breath slowly. He was thinking how the air would be out there—clean, cool

"Why yes, Kilby. The rain."

Daisy

Arnold H. Balk

Daisy was a very earnest worker. To Mrs. Dreger, who was out of the house most of the day, all that mattered was that Daisy seemed to get on with the baby, and so all was well with the world.

Daisy was nineteen years old and had never done this sort of work before. She said she wanted to do it because she was interested in nursing and had served as an aide during the war in one of the local hospitals. She was not an attractive girl. That is, she wasn't the type to draw whistles from drug store casanovas. She was of average height and bony frame. She had an olive complexion and green eyes overshadowed by unusually thick brows. Her hair was dark brown and slightly kinky in texture. However, she had a beau; and a very jealous one too. Whenever the boy friend, whose name was Albert, came to help Daisy with the evening dishes, both Mr. and Mrs. Dreger were forced to hear his declarations of undying loyalty to her over and over until taking in a movie was suggested by Mr. Dreger to his spouse, who was always in complete agreement.

It wasn't surprising to see that Daisy was loved. One may observe this phenomenon on the street any day of the week and wonder at how such pairs as these find attraction in one another. Daisy had no visible attraction. She had a husky voice which many regard as a sexy type, but this was marred by her unashamed abuse of the English language. Her speech was that of the typical New York shop